

Lessons for Localism from the Censorship Wars

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[Radical democracy] requires the creation of new subject-positions that would allow the common articulation, for example, of antiracism, antisexism, and anticapitalism. These struggles do not spontaneously converge... In order that the defense of workers' interests is not pursued at the cost of the rights of women, immigrants, or consumers, it is necessary to establish an equivalence between these different struggles.

--Chantal Mouffe, "Radical Democracy: Modern or Postmodern?" *Universal Abandon?: The Politics of Postmodernism*, ed. Andrew Ross. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988. P. 42.

The increasing domination of all cultural forms by corporate agencies is a climate change. We know it's happening, just as we know the winters are getting warmer--but it happens SO SLOWLY that it's easy to lose a conceptual grasp of just how profound and influential the shift has been.

On the educational front, the debate now is about commercials in the schools--not just written commercials (which have been there for decades), but actual TV commercials this time. Meanwhile, the post office is initiating a promotion of Star Wars stickers. Museums are named after cigarettes--etc. etc.

Herbert Schiller's noteworthy book *Culture Inc.* is MUST reading for anyone who didn't know that the First Amendment has now actually been extended to cover so-called "corporate free speech" (advertising)--and that this happened only as recently as 1978!

The shape of consumerism is shifting rapidly under two global influences. First, socialism has fallen; consumerism is unopposed anywhere (except Cuba). Thus the distribution of corporate energies need only now reflect determinations of marginal market desirability and marginal labor tractability.

Second, corporations have become parts of a global economy, which means that the functions of business and government are terminally separated: social and national concerns, which we have habitually identified as corporate concerns (or at least corporate problems), are now of concern only to corporate public relations departments.

So why should "our" government, the US government, so strongly support consumerism?

First, the homogeneity and wealth of the US market make us a desirable site for consumerist activity, and our government wants to keep it that way. The labor side is an embarrassment (and is suppressed), because it tags a longer-term instability in the US position (and one which each of us now sees first hand).

Second, because corporate influence has infiltrated the structure of government from top to bottom. "Conservative" no longer means "conservative;" it means "pro-corporate." And it has to be made clear that key power figures, like Jesse Helms (or George Bush), who are caricatured by the left as boobs, are smart and powerful machines for the advancement of "conservative" (business) interests.

Let's go back to the whole "censorship" flap one more time, and see how it looks if we understand how wily and farsighted Helms has been. Not ORIGINAL, just far-sighted.

To understand the censorship initiative, one needs to understand why on earth the US pulled out of UNESCO, of all things, in 1984. As Schiller observes, "the vehement hostility of the Reagan administration to the United Nations system in general, and to [UNESCO] in particular, can best be understood as an effort to destroy the international public sector. In doing so, it eliminates the alternative to transnational corporate enterprise." (Herbert I. Schiller, *Culture Inc.* Oxford,

1989: 116.)

The national and societal interests represented, for better or worse, by government are situated in a position of diametric conflict with the needs of contemporary corporations for untrammelled information flow. "The imperative for U.S. transnational telecommunications business interests is concretely reflected in the 'deregulatory fever' and the move toward the privatization of the public sector. This coupling of the deregulatory and privatization movements necessarily undermines a strong public sector of the economy whether on a national or international basis." (Colleen Roach, "The U.S. Position on the New World Information and Communication Order," *Journal of Communication*, vol. 37, no. 4 (Autumn 1987): 36-38. Cited in Schiller, op. cit.: 116.)

The importance of telecommunications business interests to the total transnational corporate enterprise is that INFORMATION, NOT MONEY, is now the measure of contemporary corporate activity. No wonder marxian analysis don't fit! No wonder neo-Keynesian economics doesn't provide a clear image of cultural (informational) dynamics!

In corporatism's present incarnation, as an information order (that is, as a symbolic--where formerly an "economic" order), the extent of interdependence among any of its particular systemic elements is not accurately represented by their comparative economic sizes. For instance, the interdependence between the whole larger informational order and the arts (which are economic ants under the feet of an elephant herd of transnational corporations) must be measured in terms of information flow--in terms of the symbolic order--in terms of systemic interdependencies--and in terms of "public" perceptions; that is, in terms of power and influence.

In these respects, the arts have been a formidable obstacle for transnational dismantling of the public information sector.

Politically, the arts have cemented a strong and unusual four-way coalition of extremely unlikely (and colorful) bedfellows: social brahmins and old-money families (with their allegiances to the opera and ballet); liberal-republican businesspersons who see the arts as "quality of life" assets within the community; artists themselves, amateurs, patrons and presenters, social climbers and misfits; and the intelligentsia.

In the 1980's, with the arrival of two developments--postmodernity, and multiculturalism--this arts coalition became politically vulnerable. The symphony, for instance, can no longer survive in isolation from the corporate environment; orchestras must increasingly do movies and shows to make ends meet. The differentiation between "high" and "low" culture has been smudged in postmodernity; elf the well, but that dislodged the social Brahmins from the coalition.

Moreover, the liberal intelligentsia and artists having found more or less agreement that culture must speak from a plural subject position, multiculturalism of itself then inherently bred disunity within the, arts coalition. If this disunity is perceived arc strength in one quarter (artists and intellectuals), it surely is not seen as supportive of the 'quality of life' that business requires. Business requires uniformity of markets, not informational pluralism. This puts stress on art's business supporters.

The "issue" of censorship which Helms advanced was designed to be divisive in the perspective of both of these new cultural conditions--challenging the elitism of "high" cultural standards by comparison with "community standards" (of decency), and foregrounding problems of representation by linking artistic diversity to the fuse question of sexual orientation. Homophobia was chosen as the censorable ground because of its topicality within the larger political framework, which made it possible to raise money and other support. Helms's issues were the same stuff that generates fodder for the scandalsheets and talk shows.

The longer-range campaign, for which Helms's "censorship" blast was the opening salvo, depended upon the response that emerged after the censorship issue was introduced. Who would rush to the defense of art?

The defense was split and weakened. The upper crust flaked out; corporate backers pulled back. The artists and intellectuals, going it alone, were not conceptually or pragmatically prepared for a fight. That is: even though their metier is information, the arts constituents have not adjusted to the pragmatics of postmodernity; they still mediate their work through "suitable" cultural channels (museums, institutions) rather than working raw information networks directly.

Those of us who work in the media arts per se tend to witness the communications frailties of the intelligentsia and artist community with pain. We wince, for instance, when left-intellectuals press issues effectively, using demonstrations and other “direct action,” but then lose focus on their media coverage, on the underlying importance of the media. Coverage is the reality of postmodernity

Of course, Helms was not interested in “smut;” he was only interested in displaying the termination he had brought to the century-long coalition that had scrimped arts funding a place in the government budgetary menu. It was scarcely a few months later that full-scale financial warfare on the arts broke out at every level of government funding. (Warfare is FINANCIAL, not PHYSICAL, when POWER is INFORMATION.)

The budget fight is not the end of this story; it is only a battle in the longer war. For we must now, and from now on, recognize the underlying basis of this dispute: transnational corporate enterprise stands precisely in opposition to government intervention (activity) in the information structure, to any degree and at any level.

What then are we to do, with this gloomy assessment of the potential for our losing the war as well as the battle? Can we retreat into a cottage industry, without government funding, and establish arts survival routines on that footing? Probably--but this will depend on our dexterity in balancing two opposing forces, both of which are inherent to the new corporatist informationalism.

First, today's corporations require a level playing field (but only at the marketing end of the field). So they will fight ANY cottage industry; social or cultural pluralism; or individualist deviation; and this is axiomatic. Second, however--corporations in the information age have begun to restructure, as institutions. The information network itself, it emerges, is structurally biased against hierarchical top-down ordering; data networks are characteristically fluid and anti-hegemonic by nature.

The coming time will be a time of paradox: if the fog of master narrative has been dispelled from the morning of the Enlightenment by the sunshine of postmodernism, as Lyotard would urge, then the overarching illusion for postmodernity must be a rainbow refracted from an infinity of conflicting and paradoxically coherent narrative raindrops. This serves to introduce the core paradox of cultural localism: its nurturing at the tap of corporate information flow, while it is being crushed out of existence at the same moment by those same corporate forms.

In the 1980's arts organizations learned to diversify their support by looking to corporate sponsorship. Now we know how fraudulent and meretricious that encouragement was. The “quality of life” argument that wins corporate sponsorship is the most unstable of art's four supporting legs: “corporate support” is another name for crippling corporate influence, which in the 1980's arts institutions handed over to the business world, for a song, on a platter.

The fraudulent “corporate support” for the arts will not be missed; however, corporations will continue to exert extinguishing pressures on artists. The paradox that artists must realize is that they must join the aggressors; artists must take advantage of corporate and information networking structures themselves. Presently the anti-hierarchical tendencies inherent in information networking will abet artists' individualism, *within* the strictures of a corporation-based society.

What does all of this have to say for localism? Where are “regional” artists to turn? It will be my claim that the answer to Chantal Mouffe's challenge, with which this essay opened, lies in the need for a clear and forthright oppositionality, by artists, with respect to the transnational corporate consumerist hegemony. It is on this ground, and no other, that the diversity of emancipatory discourses can meet.

Today any emancipatory project which fails to oppose the multinational corporation, to oppose itself to hegemonic corporate structure per se, will risk its convergence with those subject-positions which are defined and shaped by the everwidening currents of corporate information (power) and promotion (marketing).

Localism, which embodies a response to geographic hierarchicalization, is readily added to the roster of discourses that must stand opposed to corporatism (while adopting its tools). Localism though is in flux today, because whereas in modernity space = money, in postmodernity, the network reduces space to structure.

“Transparent” communications are economically scaled to the user; video networking will be by postal service until data networks can accomodate images cheaply. When communication through the network becomes transparent, localism will be dismantled at its geographic basis; then phoenix-like it will be reborn from its own ashes stronger than ever. For “localism” is properly a morality of diversification, and little else; where the geographical register of this diversification is erased, so also are the geographical inhibitions that govern the discourse(s).

In short, network culture will assume Diversification as its name; it configures the shared conditions for oppositional discourses of multiculturalism, sexual pluralism, regionalism, and antiracism.